WALL STREET JOURNAL

6 OCT 1969

P-Stalina, Svetlana
P-Fuller, Edmund
Soc. 4.01.2 Only One Year

Svetlana's Story: A 'Feeling of Inner Freedom'

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"How happy I am not to be there any more." So speaks Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, at the end of a description of the hollow annual Nov. 7 Red Square ceremonies, on the anniversary of the Soviet revolution, with the current rulers assembled on the "Holy of Holies," Lenin's mausoleum. That is in "Only One Year," Miss Alliluyeva's new book, describing the suspenseful parade of events, the incredible changes in life and environment, between Dec. 19, 1966, when she left Moscow for a short visit to India, and Dec. 19, 1967, when she sat with new friends in Princeton, N.J., where she wrote this chronicle.

In the new world, she celebrated "my first feast of Thanksgiving. What a marvellous substitute for the state-run Fifty-Year Jubilee of the October Revolution! . . . I find it impossible to explain what this feeling of inner freedom, which now fills me, is like. No one in the Soviet Union knows anything like this sensation, and neither did I. Now I could not live even a single day without it. . . . To experience it one has to have gone through all that I have been through. . . ."

The Bookshelf

"Twenty Letters to a Friend" was Miss Alliluyeva's previous book, the story of her family, of her childhood and young womanhood as Stalin's daughter, most of that time a resident in the Kremlin. It had been written in Russia and she smuggled the manuscript out with her. It helped to pave the way for her admittance to the U.S. and was published not many months after her arrival.

When she left Moscow, it was to take back to India for scattering in the Ganges, the ashes of her husband, Brajesh Singh, a gentle Indian Communist, older than she, who was already in disfavor with Party regulars. He confided to Svetlana, "If I return to India alive, my first action will be to quit the Communist Party." Kosygin and company disapproved of her marriage to Singh and refused to allow her to return with her ill husband to his homeland where he wished to die. The permission to take back his ashes was a somewhat shamefaced concession, but even so she was sent in the custody of a woman from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in India a strong effort was made to box her in.

The story of how she resisted that confinement, prolonged her stay to its maximum limits, and at the very end, after an agony of decision, sought asylum at the American embassy in New Delhi, is a real thriller, its suspense the greater for its quietness of tone.

Chester Bowles was then Ambassador to India. His book, "Ambassador's Report," which she read in an Indian house, chiefly persuaded her to appeal to the Americans. She never saw the Ambassador until months later, in the States, for he was ill at the time, but he had to make the decisions about what to do about the astonishing appearance, one night, of a defector no one had ever heard of, claiming to be Stalin's own daughter, and bearing the manuscript of a book about her family life.

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An embassy attache escorted her that very night on a commercial flight to Rome, then to Switzerland. There she stayed for a little over a month while her manuscript was studied in the States and a debate held over what to do about her. Clearly it was a matter of more than ordinary diplomatic delicacy, for acceptance of her, and publication of her book, was bound to annoy the Soviet Union immensely. Would it harmfully affect American efforts to reach better understandings with the Soviets? Former Ambassador George Kennan was sent to Switzerland to talk with her and advise our Government. On April 21 she flew to the United States, escorted by Alan Schwartz, an attorney who had been appointed to aid her.

Alliluyeva had left behind in Moscow a son and a daughter, by two different marriages, as well as a daughter-in-law and many friends. The probably permanent separation from them was a wrench, but in India she had realized she would "give anything not to return to that terrifying world of Kosygins and Suslovs." After the limited liberalizing trends of the brief Malenkov regime, and Khrushchev's eleven years, the swing was back toward repression and the restoration of Stalinism. All that her father represented, even all since then in the Soviet system, was hateful to her. They were not going to let her alone, but were determined to force her back into collective life as a symbol of her father.

When they realized she had escaped and that publication of her book was assured, the Soviets launched an international campaign of slander and vilification to discredit her. When Kosygin visited the U.S. in the spring of 1967, Americans heard him assert, at a United Nations TV press conference: "Alliluyeva is a morally unstable person and she's a sick person and we can only pity those who wish to use her for any political aims. . . ." That lie was already evident to those who had seen the shy candor and palpable honesty of Alliluyeva in interviews. It became clearer with the publication of her book and is made even more so now by this second one. She emerges from these pages as a lovely, gentle spirit, curiously innocent out of her grim background. Like her mother, driven by Stalin to suicide, she is an idealist. She is also something of a romantic, at times perhaps naive, but a lover of humanity, beauty and the new freedom she has discovered.

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Interspersed with her escape narrative are descriptions of Soviet life, past and present, that recapitulate and expand the material in "Twenty Letters." There are vivid portraits of major Soviet personalities and their families, and further insights into her father. "Many people today find it easier to think of him as a coarse physical monster. Actually, he was a moral and spiritual monster. This is far more terrifying. But it's the truth."

Her picture of life in the USSR is bleak. She depicts a society of universal fear, especially the fear of responsibility. It's remarkable how precisely her account concurs with the bitter statements of Anatoly Kuznetsov, the Soviet writer who defected recently, including the testimony that often a writer's house is entered and his manuscripts are seized.

"Only One Year" is the testament of a remarkable, gracious woman, who brings much to the new country to which she gave herself in complete trust. She makes us aware of our own blessings, an awareness that should not blind us to our own faults but inspire us to make our good and privileged country even better.

—EDMUND FULLER

Only One Year. By Svetlana Alliluyeva. Transl. by Paul Chavchavadze. Harper & Row. 441 pages. $7.95.